

PROVIDENCE HUMAN RELATIONS COMMISSION
87 Weybosset Street
Providence 3, Rhode Island
421-3708

COMMISSION REPORT

Purpose:

The Coddington Court hearings, conducted by the Commission on June 25, 29 and July 7, 1965 were initiated at the request of Mayor Joseph A. Doorley, Jr. and in accordance with this agency's responsibility to conduct investigation into charges that tensions exist at the Coddington Court Housing Project.

Acknowledgments:

The Commission is appreciative of the cooperation received from the following organizations and individuals who appeared at the informal hearings to provide information pertinent to the grievances expressed by the residents of the Coddington Court Housing Project:

Coddington Court Residents
West Side Neighborhood Council
Urban League of Rhode Island
John Hope Settlement House
Providence Housing Authority

We are also appreciative of the cooperation of the Rhode Island Commission Against Discrimination.

SUMMARY OF HEARINGS

CODDING COURT RESIDENTS:

The major complaints of some fifty residents of this housing project who appeared before the Commission on June 25, 1965 consisted of the following:

1. Health and sanitary services, particularly with regard to inadequate heat during the winter months and the lack of hot water during late evening hours.

2. The system of levying service charges was criticized on the basis of being inflexibly applied without regard to mitigating or extenuating circumstances. Residents were concerned that the \$10.00 deposit was not used to pay for damage to installed property.

3. Residents cited certain installed equipment as un-serviceable, inadequate and unsafe. They complained that many residents were charged for the repair of this equipment when breakdown was due to other than personal neglect.

4. Much concern was evidenced over the delay in replacing window screens. These screens were removed in March 1965 to permit painting of the window frames of the buildings. Replacement of the screens had not been completed during the month of June.

5. The matter of security was the concern of many tenants. Criticism was directed at the policy of not changing

Summary of Hearings, cont.

locks for each new tenant; the lack of screens on the first floor permitted unauthorized entrance into apartments on that floor; police response to resident calls for assistance was described as inadequate.

6. Except for two or three of the residents present at the hearings, all expressed concern over management-tenant relations. They evidenced a breakdown of communications between tenants and management. They also spoke of a lack of understanding on the part of Mrs. Britte and her inflexibility in administering policy and regulations.

WEST SIDE NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCIL:

The president of the neighborhood council notified the Providence Housing Director of the complaints of residents of Coddington Court on June 7, 1965. These complaints dealt with heat, fines, service charges, lack of maintenance, painting, and window screens.

URBAN LEAGUE OF RHODE ISLAND:

Mr. James N. Williams, Executive Director of the Urban League of Rhode Island, testified before the Commission that many of the problems at Coddington Court stem from the fact that it is a segregated housing project. In addition, he believes the management of Coddington Court inadequate to deal with the situations which arise. The last two managers have lacked

qualifications for the job. He stated that Coddington Court suffers and will continue to suffer until good management is installed, and until the total segregation aspect of the court is eliminated.

Dr. Harold Pfautz, a member of the Urban League, who was also active with the Rhode Island Commission Against Discrimination in Housing, cited a series of conferences occurring in the late 1950's that led to an agreement on the part of the Housing Authority to do the following:

a.) Seek immediate action to reduce the number of non-whites in buildings that presently have a high non-white colonization.

b.) Where attrition is reducing the number of non-white families in any building, new non-white families will not be permitted to occupy these vacancies.

c.) Request white and non-white families to transfer from one building to another to afford an equitable integrated housing situation.

d.) Obtain agreements from families to transfer when other quarters are available.

e.) All tenants be given the privilege of selecting the building of their choice.

f.) Establish a placement board of no more than three members, one of whom would be a non-white for the purpose of acting on unit assignments and transfers.

Summary of Hearings, cont.

g.) Establish an intergroup education program for staff workers to be conducted by the Rhode Island Commission Against Discrimination.

JOHN HOPE SETTLEMENT HOUSE:

Mr. Paris Sterrett, Executive Director of the John Hope Settlement House, charged that the residents of Coddington Court are being discriminated against. He said that in order to qualify for residence, one must have a social problem and bringing together under one roof all these people creates a bigger social problem. He said that his visits to many housing projects from Boston to New York led him to the conclusion that Coddington Court is the most segregated project between Boston and black Harlem. He introduced two exhibits. The first was dated 7/23/56, an opinion by Archie Smith acknowledging that separate but equal facilities are not truly equal. This came from the Journal's report regarding the meetings between the Authority and the Rhode Island Commission Against Discrimination. Mr. Sterrett alleged the findings were hidden and that some shielding was done.

Exhibit two was the annual report of the Urban League from a special study done in 1958 of non-white occupants of public housing in Providence which resulted in complaints of racial segregation. He said the Urban League, a dozen community

Summary of Hearings, cont.

groups, and he, himself, joined in an effort to abolish this practice before the year was ended.

He said in March of this year he personally visited Coddington Court, while the screens were off and witnessed babies with flies on their bodies. He said the project could be closed for health reasons if the Health Department were advised of the stopped-up sewers and other dirt and filth in the project. He accused the Providence Housing Authority of using "baiting" to redirect applicants to Coddington Court. He said before the project was built the settlement house was 60% white and 40% Negro and today it is 99 6/10% Negro and that only Coddington Court remains segregated in a beautifully integrated neighborhood. He said that Hammer Street School had been 80% white and is now 75% Negro and 25% white. He also said except for two families the people evicted by the Classical-Central project had remained in the area of the settlement's service.

He cited that most of the housing projects of Boston and New York have settlement houses built inside them with social service centers to aid the families in solving their multiple problems. He said he thought funds were provided for recreation by the Federal Government but Mr. Lyons answered that none were available.

Summary of Hearings, cont.

Mrs. Ann Hill, Social Worker, Home Visitor and Community Coordinator of John Hope Settlement House charged Mrs. Britte, Manager of Coddling Court, with inflexibility in administering late charges for rent. She said records maintained by the Settlement House show where the agency paid the rent for residents who were unable to meet their entire payment on the first of the month.

Mrs. Hill said that there is a very serious deterioration of communications between management and tenants. Some families refuse to go to the office for any reason.

She stated that the removal of all window screens in Coddling Court at one time threatened the health and safety of residents. Other situations inimical to health conditions were described including sewage back-up problems in certain apartments of the project.

PROVIDENCE HOUSING AUTHORITY:

Mr. Joseph Lyons, Director of the Providence Housing Authority, said he had been with the Authority since 1942 and director since 1947.

He denied unequivocally the charges made against him that he was personally biased; that Coddling Court was inadequately staffed; that its rules and regulations were any different from the other projects in the City or across the Nation.

Summary of Hearings, cont.

He said that the system of heat control was nationally used for purposes of economy and was regulated to provide adequate heat; that the prohibiting of night locks was a policy in most housing projects in other cities because they prevented entrance in emergencies.

He said that he was available to tenants that wished to speak to him. In this regard, he said he answered all telephone calls and letters personally and that only a few tenants were complaining about Mrs. Britte.

He said there was a position open for a race relations expert, but that this position had not been filled. Although there was money available in the budget, he would have to have the Authority's permission to fill this position.

He said that he had contacted officials of Providence's Anti-Poverty program to try to get a staff of tenant counselors to work in the projects. He was of the opinion that the funds for the race relations expert could be used as the Authority's 10% contribution in this program. Thus far, he has had no word on this.

He said the Providence Housing Authority had complied with all the provisions of their agreement with the Rhode Island Commission Against Discrimination but that the final section of the agreement calling for courses to be given to

Summary of Hearings, cont.

staff members of the Housing Authority by the Rhode Island Commission Against Discrimination, to his knowledge, had not been complied with.

He denied that they used the "baiting" system and said that only in emergency cases where larger units than those preferred were available did they redirect an applicant to a project other than his choice. He said they couldn't use a "baiting" system as they were covered by the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

He testified that there is a nursery in the recreation room where the district nurses have child education classes once a month and that the recreation room is available for the use of public or private agencies. He explained that only private parties were not allowed.

He denied that one must have a social problem to be eligible for housing in a project and he stated that there was a man in the audience who had no social problem but had been a tenant since 1951 because he just wanted good housing.

He illustrated that other projects in other cities such as one with 500 units in Hartford, Connecticut are all non-white by choice and not by design. He said only 8 white families initially applied to Coddington Court and they gradually moved out.

Summary of Hearings, cont.

He denied that Coddington Court contributed to the change in ratio between whites and non-whites at the John Hope Settlement House and said the site had been vacant before Coddington Court was built, and recalled that Central-Classical used it for a baseball field.

He enumerated the high costs of administration of public housing and explained the necessity for imposing fines and charges to encourage and teach respect of property. He pointed to the amounts charged as being small when compared to the high expenditures of the administrative services.

He blamed cold weather and lack of sufficient painters for the delay in return of the screens. He also denied that improvements were made because of the recent publicity in the papers regarding Coddington Court.

He said that neither Mr. Sterrett nor Mrs. Hill had ever contacted him to discuss the problems in question and that prior to the newspaper story, he had no knowledge that Mr. Sterrett had any connection with the letter of June 7, 1965 from the West Side Neighborhood Council. He said that the lack of trash cans was due to an experience of vandalism at the Hartford Park Project, where, because of the vandalism, residents requested the trash cans be removed. He testified that since 1953, 470 units have been repainted in Coddington Court.

Summary of Hearings, cont.

He gave an explanation of the million dollar Federal Government subsidy and pointed out that it is equal to the complete debt series of the bonds which they sell for payment of the construction of the development. He answered numerous questions regarding the budget and financial structure and said that any request for additional management or maintenance help would have to be requested in the budget and presented to the administration in New York for approval.

He said that the heat is lowered considerably instead of being turned off in buildings that have wooden frames, but that the Coddington Court construction is of solid masonry and has 12 inch walls on the first two floors and 8 inch walls on the third floor. He claimed that the heat has never dropped below 66 degrees to the best of his knowledge.

He assured the Commissioners that he intends to install an electric device in apartments in Coddington Court and that this recorder will be used to insure adequate heat in each unit.

He blamed foreign objects for back-ups in pipes and said that they have had Roto-Rooter service when needed and that this company verified that foreign objects were the cause of the trouble.

Summary of Hearings, cont.

He said that they try to answer calls for maintenance on the day on which they are submitted. He also said that the \$10.00 deposit as required in the lease is refundable upon leaving if the unit is left in good condition.

He also explained the charges for additional use of electricity and said that the maximum allotment has doubled what it ~~was~~ originally.

Chairman Dennis J. Roberts said the financial structure originally set up should be explored by the Commission for adjustment in line with the 1965 higher cost of living.

Mr. Lyons reiterated the policy of not transferring residents from one project to another and said that a survey in the Spring of 1958 at Coddington Court showed that all but two families preferred not to transfer.

He answered in the affirmative to a request that the Providence Housing Authority conduct another survey to determine whether the preferences of the residents at this time would be to stay at Coddington Court or transfer to another project of their choice.

Mr. Carroll, Chairman of the Providence Housing Authority, said that the Authority could do nothing to break up the segregated housing patterns since the choice of residence was the tenants' and was in accordance with the Civil Rights Act of Congress. He noted that those who selected it as a third choice probably could transfer.

Summary of Hearings, cont.

Mr. Harry Collins, Manager of the Roger Williams Housing Project, testified as to the operating and management policies and procedures followed at this project.

Mr. Thomas Hynes, Manager of Hartford Park Homes, stated the rules and regulations of this development and also outlined the administrative procedures which he followed as manager of the project.

Mr. John Hoffman, Accountant for the Providence Housing Authority, when called upon, explained how the units of the Authority are financed and answered questions of the Commission regarding operating costs of the Authority.

Mrs. O'Neil, Home Visitor for the Providence Housing Authority, briefly testified regarding her role, stating that she visited the homes of all prospective tenants and conducted the initial interviews.

Mrs. Dorothy Whalen, Tenant Selection Supervisor and Manager of Dexter Manor, testified regarding the policy adhered to by the Authority and administered by her in her capacity as Supervisor of Tenant Selection. She stressed the freedom of choice given to each applicant in selecting the project where he wishes to reside and she verified that the rule of non-transfers of tenants from one project to another prevails without exception.

Summary of Hearings, cont.

Mrs. Madeline Britte testified that she is the manager of the Coddington Court project. She answered the charges laid against her and denied them one by one. She answered questions regarding her duties and responsibilities and asked that witnesses from the project be permitted to speak in her behalf. This was granted and three residents of Coddington Court, Mrs. Hilliard, Mrs. Chase and Mrs. Young, all testified to the effect that living conditions at the project as well as their relations with the manager were most satisfactory.

FINDINGS:

As a result of the testimony which it received in public hearings, together with evidence collected by staff investigation, the Providence Human Relations Commission reports the following findings:

1. There is presently no individual in the employ of the Providence Housing Authority who is charged with the responsibility to work for the elimination and prevention of grievances at Coddington Court and at all other housing projects in accordance with the Housing Authority's own job requirement. Although included in the Authority's budget, the position of a race relations official has now been vacant for over a year. We find no evidence of positive efforts or actions by the Authority to deal with the tensions which have developed between the tenants and the manager of Coddington Court. Neither

Findings, cont.

do we find any program or plan on the part of the Authority to acquaint its management personnel with the importance of intergroup relations.

2. We find that the policy of the Housing Authority to assign a management aide to be in charge of the Coddington Court housing project is not in accordance with the policy laid down by its own job classification, Appendix C, which calls for a person of higher job classification.

3. We find that the agreement reached between the Rhode Island Commission Against Discrimination and the Providence Housing Authority has not been fully implemented.

4. In view of the segregated nature of the Coddington Court project and some of the evidence presented by tenants, we find that the present system of tenant selection and the policy regarding tenant transfers to other projects should be re-examined.

5. We find that the present policy of fees and service charges is at the base of many present tenant-management tensions. The method of applying these service charges in particular is open to question.

6. We find that the management of the Housing Authority, especially at Coddington Court, maintains insufficient records of the grievances of tenants and the disposition of

Findings, cont.

these cases. Management was unable to present to the Commission any complete record either of the grievances themselves or how they were resolved.

7. Many Coddington Court residents justifiably complained about the local management policy of turning off the heat during the period of 10 p. m. until 5 a.m., without due consideration to the fluctuation of outside temperature. We find that this policy has been inflexibly followed by the local management of Coddington Court causing considerable discomfort during certain times of the winter.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The foregoing represents a summary of the testimony taken at the hearings conducted by the Commission and the findings resulting from its investigation, together with material gathered by its staff.

The Commission is cognizant of the many problems in the operation of multi-tenanted projects and recognizes that such projects should be operated efficiently and economically. The Housing Authority's Commissioners are, in essence, trustees of large sums of money and valuable property and are responsible for the maintenance of decent, livable housing accommodations.

Recommendations, cont.

The Commission is generally satisfied that the Authority conducts an efficient, economical operation but the hearings disclosed that the Authority has failed to give sufficient weight to the many grievances expressed by the tenants. Persistence in this position can only lead to more serious tension, particularly at the Coddling Court housing project.

The testimony disclosed that the Housing Authority is obliged to collect sufficient income to meet current expenses and that the only financial assistance which it obtains from the Federal Government is payment of amortization charges.

In view of the fact that the Authority operated on a deficit in its past fiscal year, it is understandable that it is reluctant to fill necessary positions in order to achieve a favorable balance. If it is to accept the recommendations of this Commission, the Housing Authority will be required to dip into its reserve of approximately \$500,000. or find some other way of obtaining additional financial assistance to underwrite essential programs such as the installation of additional recreational facilities, the employment of a competent human relations specialist and the replacement of worn equipment. To this end, the Commission stands ready to assist the Authority insofar as its good offices may be helpful to the Authority.

Recommendations, cont.

The Commission approached these hearings as part of its obligation to maintain peace, good will and harmony among the citizens of Providence. The Commission is aware of the fact that the Housing Authority has operated these projects for a great many years and that it will be its obligation to continue the operation of these projects for many years in the future. What we recommend is intended to provide solutions to urgent, pressing problems and a re-orientation of the Housing Authority's policies, in the light of the rapidly changing events in the whole field of human relations.

With these preliminary observations out of the way, the Commission makes the following affirmative recommendations:

1. A document entitled "Proposed Amendment to Personnel Policy in Connection with Salaries", Appendix D, together with Appendix B, "Groups, Classes and Class Titles", and a document entitled "Class Specifications" Appendix C, have been furnished by the Housing Authority to this Commission.

Class 6 A, Management A II, provides as follows:

"The Management-Aide shall be responsible for all phases of a Project operation under the direction of the Manager or the Executive Director. He must be fully informed and experienced in project operation at all levels and be qualified to take charge in the absence of the Manager. His direct responsibility includes all of the management functions with the exception of personal visits to the apartments, for the collection of rents. He shall have at least five

years' experience in housing authority work or the equivalent thereto in outside employment. He shall be at least a High School graduate able to supervise others and have had experience in handling the public."

Class 9 A, Racial Relations Officer, provides as follows:

"The Racial Relations Officer will also have management responsibilities for RI 1-3, Coddington Court. In that capacity, he shall be responsible for all the management functions of that small development just as a Manager is of the larger developments."

"In addition to his management functions, he shall have the responsibility of seeing to it that all non-white applicants and tenants are treated so that there may be no possibility of any justifiable complaint of discrimination because of race, creed or color in any phase of the Authority's operations. He shall cooperate with the Tenant Application Supervisor in the selection of tenants and the assignment of families to developments in order that integrated communities will result. At the management level, he will confer with the Managers in the assignment and transfer of families so that the patterns of assignment will not be the occasion of any charges of segregation. He shall also be available for consultation in management problems where any possibility may exist that any non-white families feel discriminated against. He shall also perform such other related duties as may be assigned to him from time to time by the Executive Director. He shall be a graduate of high school and have some experience in human relations problems."

Recommendations, cont.

An examination of the exhibits furnished to the Commission discloses that Coddington Court requires a racial relations officer who will also have management responsibility. There is in Class 9 A a recognition of the special problems relating to Coddington Court and the necessity for a highly trained manager with a substantial background in human relations. No such position has been filled with respect to Coddington Court. Instead, Coddington Court is being operated and managed by a management aide.

It should be observed that the racial relations officer, in addition to his management functions, is expected to be available for consultation in management problems, not only at Coddington Court but at all housing projects. It may well be that, in light of present day experience, the Authority would find it advisable to appoint a manager for Coddington Court and select a racial relations officer to assist in connection with human relations problems, which may arise from time to time at all the projects. If this were the case, this individual would be charged with the responsibility of being a liaison between tenants and management and should develop such programs as may be necessary to relieve and remove tensions which are bound to arise. This person should work with the tenant selection personnel to assure

Recommendations, cont.

that each applicant is given freedom of choice, whenever possible, in the selection of the project in which he wishes to reside. This individual should also sit in at all staff meetings of management personnel in order to provide the necessary insight and guidance in all human relations problems.

2. Mrs. Britte was thrust into a position which requires considerable experience, not only in the field of human relations, but also in the supervision and management of a project containing 119 units. It may well be that the present management aide may be able to fulfill the requirements of management aide, as set forth in her job specifications, but the demands at the Coddington Court project call for a compliance with the Housing Authority's own job specifications.

3. The Rhode Island Commission Against Discrimination and the Authority should forthwith review the agreement reached between the two bodies to determine the nature and degree of compliance and the adequacy of said agreement at the present time.

4. A survey should be undertaken forthwith to determine tenant choice with respect to occupancy in Coddington Court. This survey will be meaningless unless those who desire to leave Coddington Court are permitted to move to other available

Recommendations, cont.

projects. The policy of the Housing Authority which prohibits a transfer from one project to another is based on economic considerations, but, in light of the segregated nature of Coddling Court, every effort should be made to respect tenants' choice, without regard to the present policy of tenant non-transfers. This is particularly true, for example, in the case of Dexter Manor and will be equally true in the case of the Bradford House when it is completed.

5. While a system of fees or service charges may be justified in the operation of the Housing Authority, it is the Commission's view that a too rigid application of such a system results in inequities. We, therefore, recommend a complete review of the fee system and the application of the same.

6. Records of grievances of tenants should be retained by the Housing Authority and a record made of the disposition of said grievances. Such records should be open for public inspection.

7. The Commission is convinced, on the basis of the evidence presented, that there were many nights during which tenants of Coddling Court suffered hardship as a result of the policy of shutting off the heat between the hours of 10 p.m. and 5. a.m. Justification of this policy was that because of the construction of the buildings, the apartments retained

Recommendations, cont.

sufficient heat through the whole night. The testimony received indicated that this was not always the case. The Commission, therefore, recommends that heat at Coddington Court, during the winter months, should be maintained at all times in such amounts as is reasonably necessary to provide adequate heat for all tenants. We are particularly persuaded in our view by virtue of the fact that in other projects no such rigid policy is followed as pertains at the Coddington Court project.

8. The Commission, as part of its investigation, made an inspection of the Coddington Court site and is impressed with the fact that the recreational facilities of a project of that size, which includes 119 families and over 400 children, are inadequate. In view of the contemplated development of the area, the Commission recommends that the appropriate agencies of government study the site to the end that adequate recreational areas and facilities be acquired immediately to service the needs of the Coddington Court community.

- - - - -

IN CITY COUNCIL

MAR 3 - 1968

FIRST READING

REFERRED TO COMMITTEE ON URBAN REDEVELOPMENT
RENEWAL & PLANNING

Vincent Vespia, CLERK